

NOTES ON GENTILE PRO-SEMITISM

New England's "Good Jews"

EDMUND WILSON

THE Gentile of American Puritan stock who puts himself in contact with the Hebrew culture finds something at once so alien that he has to make a special effort in order to adjust himself to it, and something that is perfectly familiar. The Puritanism of New England was a kind of new Judaism, a Judaism transposed into Anglo-Saxon terms. These Protestants, in returning to the text of the Bible, had concentrated on the Old Testament, and some had tried to take it as literally as any Orthodox Jew. The Judaic observances in New England were reduced to honoring the Sabbath on Sunday, but the attendance in the house of worship and the cessation from work on this day approached in their rigor the Jewish practice; and in England "certain extremists," says Dr. Cecil Roth, in his *History of the Jews in England*, had "regarded the 'old' dispensation as binding, and even reverted to its practices of circumcision and the observance of the seventh-day Sabbath. In 1600, the Bishop of Exeter complained of the prevalence of 'Jewism' in his diocese, and such views were comparatively common in London and the Eastern counties. Numerous persons were prosecuted here for holding what were termed 'Judaistic' opinions, based on the literal interpretations of the Old Testament. As late as 1612, two so-called Arians died at the stake (the last persons to suffer capital punishment in

England purely for their religion) for teaching views regarding the nature of God which approximated to those of Judaism. The followers of the Puritan extremist, John Traske, went so far on the path of literalism that they were imprisoned in 1618-20 on a charge of Judaizing. In this case, the accusation was so far from being exaggerated that a number of them settled in Amsterdam and formally joined the synagogue."

When the Puritans came to America, they identified George III with Pharaoh and themselves with the Israelites in search of the Promised Land. They called their new country Canaan and talked continually of the covenant they had made with God. Winthrop and Bradford were Moses and Joshua; Anne Hutchinson was pilloried as Jezebel. "The Christian church so-called," said a preacher in New Marlborough, Massachusetts, "is only a continuation and extension of the Jewish church." "If we keep this covenant," said Winthrop, "we shall finde then the God of Israel is among us." Hebrew, later on in New England, was to become a major subject not merely in the colleges but even in the schools.

All this, of course, is well enough known. There is an interesting chapter on the subject—to which I am indebted for the facts above—in a volume by various hands called *The Hebrew Impact on Western Civilization: Hebraic Foundations of American Democracy*, edited by Abraham I. Katsh. Yet we tend to forget how close our original relationship was to the Old Testament Jewish tradition. Our conception itself of America as a country with a mission in the world comes down to us from our Mosaic ancestors. We are told by Harriet Beecher Stowe that she had always felt in her child-

IN THIS essay on philo-Semitism in America, EDMUND WILSON finds the feelings of Americans of Puritan stock peculiarly engaged by Jews and Judaism. Mr. Wilson, the first man of letters in this country, has just completed an autobiographical work, *A Piece of My Mind: Reflections at Sixty* (of which the present article forms a part), to be published later this month by Farrar, Straus and Cudahy.

hood, after reading Cotton Mather's *Magnalia*, that "the very ground [New England] I stood on was consecrated by some special dealing of God's providence"; and, even in our time, Santayana, in *The Last Puritan*, has made one of his New England characters say: "We were always a circumcised people, consecrated to great expectations." The Gentile American, however, is no longer aware of this in his attitude toward Judaism, and the American Jew does not recognize in what is left of the Puritan tradition a Gentile imitation of Judaism. I have recently been collecting examples of the persistence through the 19th century of the New Englander's deep-rooted conviction that the Jews are a special people selected for a unique role by God, and that New England somehow shares this destiny.

PERHAPS the most curious of these is the rabbinical metamorphosis of the Hebrew scholar Calvin Ellis Stowe, the husband of Harriet Beecher. That Harriet was herself very close to the Pilgrim's self-identification with Israel is indicated not merely by the passage above but again and again elsewhere in her writings. She will, for example, open a chapter of *Pogonuc People* with the statement that "Zeph Higgins was a good Jew." This does not mean that the pious Connecticut farmer was literally of Jewish blood, but simply that he tried to conform to the New England version of the Jewish code. "Zephaniah Pennel," she writes in *The Pearl of Orr's Island*, "was what might be called a Hebrew of the Hebrews. New England, in her earlier days, founding her institutions on the Hebrew Scriptures, bred better Jews than Moses could, because she read Moses with the amendments of Christ. The state of society in some of the districts of Maine, in these days, much resembled in its spirit that which Moses labored to produce in ruder ages. It was entirely democratic, simple, grave, hearty, and sincere—solemn and religious in its daily tone, and yet, as to all material good, full of wholesome thrift and prosperity." And again, in *Old Town Folks*: "I think that no New Englander,

brought up under the regime established by the Puritans, could really estimate how much of himself had actually been formed by this constant face-to-face intimacy with Hebrew literature. . . . My grandfather (at family prayers) always prayed standing, and the image of his mild, silvery head, leaning over the top of the high-backed chair, always rises before me as I think of early days. There was no great warmth or fervor in those daily exercises, but rather a serious and decorous propriety. They were Hebraistic in their form; they spoke of Zion and Jerusalem, of the God of Israel, the God of Jacob, as much as if my grandfather had been a veritable Jew; and except for the closing phrase, 'for the sake of Thy Son, our Savior,' might well have been uttered in Palestine by a well-trained Jew in the time of David." Now, Calvin Stowe, in his Hebraic studies, went on from the Bible to the Talmud, and he prepared a pioneering study of this later holy book, in which Harriet attempted in vain to interest the *Atlantic Monthly*. He allowed his beard and his hair to grow and wore habitually a rabbinical skullcap, and, with his spectacles, he presents in his photographs an appearance that would have adorned any synagogue. He liked to pose with a New Testament—in some curious unbooklike form, perhaps masquerading as a Torah scroll—held up before him like Moses' Tablets. His wife was in the habit of referring to him as "my old rabbi" or simply "Old Rab." It may be that, in the case of Calvin Stowe, his Judaizing was a parallel development to that which eventually led Harriet to become an Episcopalian. Harriet had arrived by that time at a full and outspoken revolt against the Calvinist doctrines of Original Sin and salvation through Election; and it may be that Calvin, in a quieter way—he had to teach in Calvinist seminaries—was exemplifying a similar tendency. In Judaism, the Protestant of the Puritan tradition finds the spiritual austerity he already knows, but not bedeviled—the word is exact—by the fear of a despotic Deity who seems to favor or condemn by whim. The Jewish God may be retributory and terrible but he

is not preoccupied with torment, not a perpetrator of nasty surprises as the Calvinist God was.

THE most extreme case, however, of an atavistic obsession with the Jews on the part of a well-educated New Englander is that of James Russell Lowell. His mania on this subject is mentioned, in a letter to Charles Eliot Norton, by his England friend Leslie Stephen. "He was so delighted," says Stephen, "with his ingenuity in discovering that everybody was in some way descended from the Jews because he had some Jewish feature, or a Jewish name, or a Gentile name such as the Jews were in the habit of assuming, or because he was connected with one of the departments of business or the geographical regions in which Jews are generally to be found, that it was scarcely possible to mention any distinguished man who could not be conclusively proved to be connected with the chosen race. The logic sometimes seemed to his hearers to have trifling defects; but that was all the greater proof of a sagacity which could dispense with strict methods of proof. To say the truth, this was the only subject upon which I could conceive Lowell approaching within measurable distance of boring." And an anonymous reporter, in the *Atlantic Monthly*, of "Conversations with Mr. Lowell"—quoted in the biography of Lowell by Horace Elisha Scudder—describes in detail such a disquisition. "At the mention of some medieval Jew," he says, "Lowell at once began to talk of the Jews, a subject which turned out to be almost a monomania with him. He detected a Jew in every hiding place and under every disguise, even when the fugitive had no suspicion of himself. To begin with nomenclature: all persons named for countries or towns are Jews; all with fantastic, compound names, such as Lilienthal, Morgenroth; all with names derived from colors, trades, animals, vegetables, minerals; all with Biblical names, except Puritan first names; all patronymics ending in *son*, *sohn*, *sen*, or any other versions; all Russels, originally so called from

red-haired Israelites; all Walters, by long descended derivation from wolves and foxes in some ancient tongue; the Caecilii, therefore Cecilia Metella, no doubt St. Cecilia, too, consequently the Cecils, including Lord Burleigh and Lord Salisbury; he cited some old chronicle in which he had cornered one Robert de Caecilia and exposed him as an English Jew. He gave examples and instances of these various classes with amazing readiness and precision, but I will not pretend that I have set down even these few correctly. Of course there was Jewish blood in many royal houses and in most noble ones, notably in Spain. In short, it appeared that this insidious race had penetrated and permeated the human family more universally than any other influence except original sin. He spoke of their talent and versatility, and of the numbers who had been illustrious in literature, the learned professions, art, science, and even war, until by degrees, from being shut out of society and every honorable and desirable pursuit, they had gained the prominent positions everywhere.

"Then he began his classifications again: all bankers were Jews, likewise brokers, most of the great financiers—and that was to be expected; the majority of barons, also baronets; they had got possession of the press, they were getting into politics; they had forced their entrance into the army and navy; they had made their way into the cabinets of Europe and become prime ministers; they had slipped into diplomacy and become ambassadors. But a short time ago they were packed into the Ghetto: and now they inhabited palaces, the most aristocratic quarters, and were members of the most exclusive clubs. A few years ago they could not own land; they were acquiring it by purchase and mortgage in every part of Europe, and buying so many old estates in England that they owned the larger part of several counties.

"... Finally he came to a stop, but not to a conclusion, and as no one else spoke, I said, 'And when the Jews have got absolute control of finance, the army and navy, the press, diplomacy, society, titles,

the government, and the earth's surface, what do you suppose they will do with them and with us? 'That,' he answered, turning towards me, and in a whisper audible to the whole table, 'that is the question which will eventually drive me mad.'"

Though Lowell admired the Jews, he conceived them as a power so formidable that they seemed on the verge of becoming a menace. In this vision of a world run entirely by Jews there is something of morbid suspicion, something of the state of mind that leads people to believe in the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion," in a Jewish international conspiracy to dominate the civilized world.

BUT, before trying to get to the sources from which this delusion springs, let me give another example of New England Pan-Judaic doctrine. It might be thought that Barrett Wendell of Harvard was the perfect type of old-fashioned snob in regard to every kind of American not of strictly Anglo-Saxon origins, yet we find him—on October 18, 1891—writing to his father as follows: "I heard a queer theory the other day about the Yankee Puritans, whose religious views were so strongly Hebraic. They came chiefly, it seems, from Norfolk and Lincolnshire. These counties, some two or three centuries before the Reformation, had been the chief strongholds of the English Jews, who were finally expelled from the kingdom by one of the Plantagenet kings. At the time of the expulsion, many changed their faith and remained to be absorbed in the native population. It is wholly possible, then, that the Yankee Puritan, with all his Old Testament feeling, was really, without knowing it, largely Jewish in blood. There is in the Yankee nature much that would give color to the theory; but of course it is very far from being a proved fact. . . ." Is there any actual evidence for this or have we here simply a recrudescence of the Judaizing tendency of the Puritan?

I have noted that Lowell's prophecy of a universal Jewish dominance seems to skirt the state of mind of those who believe in

the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion." It is possible to cite examples of a glorification of the Jews that has passed suddenly into a neurotic anti-Semitism. Such an example was the late John Jay Chapman. He was a mixture of New York and New England, but the New England strain in him was very strong. His grandmother had been a lieutenant of William Lloyd Garrison's, whom (Garrison) Chapman very much admired and about whom he wrote a book. Especially in this connection his relations with the Jews are significant. "There is a depth of human feeling in the Jew," he wrote in a memorandum of 1897, "that no other race ever possessed. We do no more than imitate it—and follow it. David, for instance, and his conduct about Uriah's wife and the child that died—and Absalom—and Jonathan. Compare the Greek—the Chinese, the Roman. These Jews are more human than any other men. It is the cause of the spread of their religion—for we are all adopted into Judah. The heart of the world is Jewish. There is the same spirit in the Old Testament as in the New. What monstrous perversion—that we should worship their God and despise themselves! We admire the Pyramids and the Egyptians, but the history of the Jews is the most remarkable, the most notable thing, on the globe. Their sacred books and chronicles and traditions and history make the annals of every other nation mere rubbish—and I feel this same power in the Jews I know. They are the most humane and the strongest people morally, mentally and physically. They persist. I'm glad I'm a Jew. I believe that's the reason why this paper-faced civilization impresses me so little. Take Habbakuk," etc., etc. (It was true that Chapman looked rather Jewish, and he wore an impressive beard in a period when beards had ceased to be fashionable; but neither Chapman himself in his memoirs nor his biographer, Mr. M. A. DeWolfe Howe, records that he had Jewish blood.)

This pro-Semitism was unquestionably to some extent due to Chapman's political dependence on a devoted Jewish friend, Mr. Isaac H. Klein of New York, who worked

with him in his efforts at reform. "The Jews have in my experience," he writes in a letter dated from Wall Street, a little later in 1897, "more faith than the Christians. They have clever heads, better hearts and more belief in the power of good every way. They gave to the world all the religion it has got and are themselves the most religious people in it. I work with them day and night and most of the time is spent in prying up some Christian to do a half day's work."

BUT between the 1890's and the 1920's, Chapman's attitude toward the Jews underwent an astonishing change. One gets the impression from a letter, written from Atlantic City, of December, 1919, that his disillusion may have begun with the spectacle of crowds of vacationing Jews who did not strike him as being the equals of Habakkuk and Isaac Klein: "They are uncritical," he now writes. "Life is a simple matter to them: a bank account and the larder. No, they will never rule the world. They are too easily deflected—absorbed and satisfied. It is foolish to rule the world and the Jew knows it. They are crumbling material for the hands of their leaders, and ropes of sand. They have too much sense—and will go for the glittering garments and not murder Progress. They strike me as an inferior race, in spite of their great advantages. . . . But to return to the Jews, my long acquaintance with Klein and his club makes me at home with them—but I'm glad I haven't more Jewish blood in me than I have. I don't want any more. These people don't know anything. They have no religion, no customs except eating and drinking."

Note here again the specter of Jewish power. As Chapman watches a crowd of Jews behaving in a perfectly natural way, he concludes that they will not "rule the world." Why should he have expected them to?—and why should he be surprised that these citizens from New York and Philadelphia show an interest in their larders and their bank accounts? Do Americans of other stocks not give evidence of similar interests? Later on, he went even further and began to link

the Jews with the Catholics in his attacks on the Catholic church. He actually got to the point of publishing in an organ of the Ku Klux Klan—the *National Kourier* of May 29, 1925—the following queer anti-Semitic sonnet:

*How restful is it to survey the sea
From some low, windswept, silvery, sandy
dune,
And watch the eternal climbing of the moon
Full-orbed, above the shore's complacency;
Wondering the while if Asian plains there
be,
Or rock-walled valleys, never shined upon,—
Save by the perpendicular sun at noon,—
So safe, so guarded, so remote as we.*

*But see, a sail!—nay more,—from every land
They cloud the ocean, convoyed by a crew
Of Master Pirates who have work in hand:
Old Europe's nation-wreckers heave in view!
And lo, to aid them, on our margin stand
Our citizens,—the Jesuit and the Jew.*

There is, I think, involved in Chapman's case, as perhaps in Lowell's also, a special relation to the Judaic element in the New England Puritan tradition. This tradition came to life again—after a partial eclipse during the early 1800's—in the Abolitionist crusade against slavery that inspired so much of the ardor of the Federal forces in the Civil War. "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" comes straight out of the Biblical Prophets, and the Old Testament Jehovah takes the field again at the head of the Federal armies. In the period before the war, Lowell had been stirred by this fervor—under the influence, it is said, of his first wife—and had worked for the Abolitionist cause; John Jay Chapman, who was proud of his grandmother, and had relived the Abolitionist movement in writing his book about Garrison, had once traveled to a Pennsylvania town where a Negro had been burned alive, to hold an expiatory meeting—a meeting at which he was the only speaker and to which only two people came. Both Lowell and Chapman, in their later years, more or less dropped crusading, somewhat lapsed in their

faith. The former, Ambassador to the Court of St. James, became an official figure; the latter, having married a well-to-do wife, became the proprietor of a country estate and a somewhat petulant critic of everyone in literature and politics who was playing a more active part than he. Both, perhaps, had a bad conscience. In Lowell's case, he seems half to hope, half to fear, that the Puritan-Jewish Jehovah is going to take over the world; in Chapman's case, he seems—not admitting it—to be gnawed by a sense of guilt toward the moral inspiration of the Jews in which he has felt he shared: he accuses lest he stand condemned.

BUT there is something else, too, in this curious shift from a faith in the Jews to a fear of them. The basic thing here, I believe, is that the Jews have been all too successful in convincing the rest of the world of their privileged relations with God. They have made it all too easy for visionary people—that is, people like themselves—to assume that there is something supernatural about them. What Chapman, who had idealized the Jews on the evidence of the Bible and of his friend Mr. Klein, was so startled one day to realize, on the boardwalk at Atlantic City, was that German or Russian or Polish or Lithuanian Jewish Americans were human beings like everyone else. And yet for a certain type of mind—the apocalyptic kind—it is difficult to accept this conclusion. For such a mind, an awe of the Jews persists but it takes on a different aspect. It may turn to the extreme anti-Semitism of Hitler and Henry Ford—both idealistic cranks—which, as Waldo Frank has said in his study *The Jew in Our Day*, is a department of demonology. Or it may merely—as in Lowell's case—survive as a superstition, an uneasiness in the presence of something unknown, an uncomfortable apprehension. These people, unique in their cohesiveness, their inbreeding, their self-isolation, so impressive in their sureness of their contact with God, is there not something queer about them? Do they not possess special powers? May they not be masters of a magic that enables them to

intrigue against us, to demoralize, subvert, destroy us? Nor is it, I think, out of the question that we ourselves, deep in our "psyches," may consider it correct that we should thus be destroyed in punishment for our own apostasy, our apostasy toward, precisely, the Jewish God—that apostasy of which both the Testaments have combined, at the basis of our moral training, to implant in us the sense of danger?

An odd non-American example of this tendency to credit the Jews with supernatural powers is to be found in the novels of Gerald du Maurier. I have not been able to discover in any of the biographical material about him that du Maurier himself had a Jewish strain but in each of his three novels a rather unexpected Jewish theme plays a more or less important role. In the first of these, *Peter Ibbetson*, we are told of the mother of Colonel Ibbetson that she "had been the only child and heiress of an immensely rich pawnbroker, by name Mendoza; a Portuguese Jew, with a dash of colored blood in his veins besides, it was said." But Peter himself is a nephew of the Colonel's on the latter's paternal side, and the Jewish character here is the villain. In *The Martian*, on the other hand, the third of the series, a woman with Jewish blood is the heroine. We are told of Leah Gibson that "her mother . . . was a Spanish Jewess—a most magnificent and beautiful old person in splendid attire, tall and straight, with white hair and thick black eyebrows, and large eyes as black as night. In Leah the high Sephardic Jewish type was more marked than in Mrs. Gibson. . . . It is a type that sometimes, just now and again, can be so pathetically noble and beautiful in a woman, so suggestive of chastity and the most passionate love combined—love conjugal and filial and maternal—love that implies all the big practical obligations and responsibilities of human life, that the mere term 'Jewess' (and especially its French equivalent) brings to my mind some vague, mysterious, exotically poetic image of all I love best in woman." But in the intermediate *Trilby*, du Maurier's conception of the Jew

is developed in a major and a very strange way. We are told, in the first place, of Little Billee, one of the three English art students in Paris about whom the story centers, that "in his winning and handsome face there was just a faint suggestion of some possible very remote Jewish ancestor—just a tinge of that strong, sturdy, irrepressible, indomitable, indelible blood which is of such priceless value in diluted homeopathic doses, like the dry white Spanish wine called Montijo, which is not meant to be taken pure; but without a judicious admixture of which no sherry can go round the world and keep its flavor intact; or like the famous bull-dog strain, which is not beautiful in itself; and yet just for lacking a little of the same no greyhound can ever be a champion." Little Billee is thus the only one of the three companions who is shown to possess any genuine talent. But the great Jewish character in *Trilby* is, of course, the German Jewish Svengali: the fabulous musician who cannot sing but who, by hypnotizing the tone-deaf Trilby and exploiting her wonderful voice, makes of her a great artist. Svengali, in other connections, is always represented as everything that these gentlemanly Britishers most abhor: he is dirty, insulting, boastful, mendacious, malicious, quarrelsome; they have constantly to put him in his place. Yet Trilby, in spite of her voice, has not only no ear whatever for music, but no range of emotion or expression which would be adequate, even if she had one, to achieve the astounding effects which Svengali is able to teach her by turning her into a simple automaton. The concert—described at great length—at which Trilby so triumphantly sings, is "the apotheosis of voice and virtuosity"; it sounds like a combination of Yvette Guilbert and Adelina Patti. Yet—except for the voice itself—the whole thing is an emanation of Svengali's musical soul; and if this is true, the horrid Svengali must have, after all, as Bernard Shaw says, "better grounds for [his] egotism than anybody else in the book except Little Billee and Trilby." But from whence does all this subtlety and innocence, this tenderness and joy and sor-

row, arise in the Svengali we know? There is no explanation of this: the character, in human terms, is not in any deep sense created. What is really behind Svengali is the notion, again, that the Jew, even in his squalidest form, is a mouthpiece of our Judaico-Christian God, whose voice he has, in this case, transferred, ventriloquially, to the throat of Trilby. There is always in these novels of du Maurier's—binational, bilingual as he was—a certain light playing-off of French civilization against English; but the picture is further complicated—it is one of the things that make them interesting—by this dual role of the Jew, who appears—Colonel Ibbetson, Svengali in his contacts of everyday—now as a malignant devil, whose malignancy is hardly accounted for; now—as in Leah, Little Billee, and the Svengali who animates Trilby—as a spirit from an alien world who carries with it an uncanny prestige, who may speak in a divine tongue.

IN THE meantime, for the Jew—or for many Jews—it must become almost as embarrassing to be taken for a Hebrew prophet with a private line to God as for a diabolical demiurge who is out to "murder progress"—whatever Chapman meant by that. I remember a clear illustration of this in a story told of himself by Dr. Paul Tillich of Union Theological Seminary in a discussion after one of his seminars. Dr. Tillich explained that he had never at first approved of the Zionist movement. He had thought it a good thing that a group—the Jews—should survive in the modern world to represent a religious faith independent of patriotism, whose Kingdom—since they had no country—could not be of this world. But it was then pointed out to him by a Jewish friend that he was being quite unfair to "the petty bourgeois Cohens and Levis" in expecting them to be Moseses and Isaiahs, and in restricting them to the status of aliens in countries in which they were still not accepted on quite the same basis as other natives and which were liable to anti-Semitic panics. Dr. Tillich was so struck by the justice of this that he at once joined a Zionist organization.